

Transforming Vermont's System of Public Education

The State Board of Education has embarked on an initiative to transform Vermont's public schools. This initiative is focused on making our schools, and high schools in particular, more relevant to students. Although this is important and timely work, I believe the focus is off target. The quality of Vermont's public education system is already very high. We should be directing our transformative energies towards a commonly accepted but rarely examined aspect of our public school system: it's poor organization and inefficiency. The current economic situation makes this inefficiency especially intolerable, but I believe it is through the current economic crisis that we can finally find the necessary political will to transform these systemic deficiencies.

Vermont's system of public education is actually not much of a system, but rather a very loose confederation of local districts that can choose to work together, or not, when they see fit. This semi-structure is rife with duplication of effort and wasted time and money. The chief cause of this inefficiency is the political nature of the system. Politics always makes systems more inefficient, and our educational system, from top to bottom, is overly political.

In Vermont, the political nature of our education system is frequently expressed in a blind allegiance towards "local control" even though there is truly not much local control, and some of the things that are controlled locally (hiring, purchasing, contracting, etc.) are the very things that make public education in Vermont at times inefficient, complex, and costly. From a mathematical perspective:

LOCAL CONTROL = OPERATIONAL COMPLEXITY = INEFFICIENCY = HIGH COSTS

To become more efficient, we need to start thinking of our public education structure as a true system. At the heart of this effort will be the need to re-examine issues of local control vs. centralization. This will not mean abandoning local control altogether. We need to consider, however, what aspects of the system should remain within the purview of local decision making and what areas should be managed centrally in order to achieve a greater efficiency.

A compromise between local control and centralization would seem to be the creation of a regional school district system. A series of policy initiatives should be introduced that makes the regionalization of educational services more attractive or maintaining the status quo too expensive. Such strategically designed policy initiatives when considered within the context of our current economic crisis can provide the necessary energy to start transforming our current system into one that is more efficient. I suggest the following areas for policy consideration:

- The small schools grant should be reduced to support only those small schools that meet newly created socio-economic and geographic guidelines. These guidelines would establish funding criteria based on the socio-economic status of a community and the relative distance of a small school from other schools.
- Districts that do not operate schools should be forced to consolidate with other districts. Even if a district does not operate a school, it presents a cost liability to the system by being a corporate entity that can, and will be, sued. These districts are also required to meet the same regulatory, policy, and financial reporting requirements of districts that do operate schools. Eliminating these districts would reduce administrative costs.

- The current configuration of school districts and supervisory unions should be reviewed for consolidation. A commission similar to a “base closing” commission should be formed to oversee this process.
- New regional school districts should be formed with expanded authority over the major operational areas that affect cost:
 - Hiring – These regional districts should be the only entities allowed to employ individuals. This would force the consolidation of union master agreements and allow staff to be shared among schools more efficiently.
 - Business Services – All business services should be housed in these regional school districts in order to reduce duplication of effort and to provide better control and reporting systems.
 - Purchasing and Contracting – These regional districts should be the only entities allowed to make purchases and to contract for services. This would promote more efficient purchasing and would allow services, including student transportation, to be better coordinated within a region.
 - Charter Schools - These regional school districts should be given statutory authority to create innovative learning structures along the lines of charter schools. These structures would employ new technologies and provide greater flexibility for students and families at lower costs.
 - Consolidated Grand Lists - The formation of regional school districts allows for the consolidation of education property tax grand lists within these regions. Such consolidation would likely reduce the statistical volatility of the Common Level of Appraisal, a major cause of property tax increases in recent years.
- A state-wide student information system, special education management system, and financial accounting system should be implemented. We currently do not have a uniform approach to data systems. Public education is a very complex business; we need to have standardized data systems matched to uniform governance entities so we can better manage our programs and their related costs.

These are examples of the types of policies I would introduce to start transforming our public education system. We need to move beyond pedagogical debate, reactionary tinkering and political rhetoric to take advantage of this important moment in history to restructure our public education system so that it can become more efficient, manageable, and sustainable. This work will no doubt require significant political leadership, but if we do not act now we jeopardize the future social and economic well being of our state.

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